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AUTHOR Capper, Colleen A.
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ABSTRACT

The squeaky wheel method of policy implementation takes place when policy mandates are not implemented by need, but by the kind and amount of external influence mobilized on behalf of policy recipients. Case studies of three rural students with severe disabilities demonstrated that the services each child received were dependent on the strength of the child's external support. External support that shaped implementation of special education policy included child advocates, preschool services, and parents, and such support usually benefited only the target child. Similarly, rural disadvantaged school districts with little influence at the state level often fail to receive the resources and support needed to implement special education policy. Struggling financially, the poor school district may choose to underidentify disabled students and to cut services where it can. Thus, the implementation process at the microlevel (that is, the process negotiated between student and school district) reflects the larger, more systemic implementation process negotiated between the state education department and the local district. Disadvantaged school districts may benefit from an advocate to provide a stronger voice at the state level. This report contains 10 references and a table outlining parallels between systemic and microlevel barriers to implementation. (SV)

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The Squeaky Wheel of Policy Implementation: Poor Children with Disabilities and Disadvantaged School Districts

Colleen A. Capper

Department of Educational Administration

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Running Head: THE SQUEAKY WHEEL

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the implementation of special education policy for rural students with disabilities who attend school in poor school districts. The discussion is based on the results of a qualitative field study. The author argues that policy is not implemented according to student need, but is dependent on the student's external support, which mirrors the relationship of the disadvantaged school district with state assistance.

The Squeaky Wheel of Policy Implementation: Poor Children with Disabilities and Disadvantaged School Districts

The current educational agenda of the nation reflects considerable concern for the increasing proportion of children from minority groups, and for the growing number of children from households below the poverty line (Hodgkinson, 1988; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1988; Reeves, 1988). Not only are more students at risk for educational failure, but school districts with greater proportions of disadvantaged students may also, as a system, be considered at risk for educational failure. This paper argues that poor students with disabilities are the recipients of the squeaky wheel method of educational policy implementation from the local school district. Concomitantly, at the systems level, the relationship between school districts with higher proportions of disadvantaged students and state departments of education, mirrors the microlevel student/district policy relationship, and subsequently these school districts are also subject to the squeaky wheel method of policy implementation from state officials.

This paper will first define and describe the concept of the "squeaky wheel." Second, examples of special education policy implementation at the microlevel of the poor student will demonstrate how implementation resources are based on external support rather than student need. Next, the squeaky wheel method of policy implementation at the organizational level will be discussed, and the symbiotic relationship between the organizational level and microlevel will be described. Fourth, reasons will be explored, at both the systems level and microlevel, why disadvantaged students and economically poorer school districts have little influence on the development and implementation of educational policy. Finally, strategies to increase the influence disadvantaged school districts and poor families have on policy will be considered.

Conceptual Framework

Murphy (1973) studied the implementation of Title V of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 which provided unrestricted grants to revitalize and reorganize state education agencies. Murphy described the implementation of the Act as grease for the squeaky wheel. From a hierarchical, top-down analysis, he

purported that ". . . the money [was used] to grease squeaky wheels, or to support pre-existing priorities, and [was] distributed usually on the basis of intra-organizational competition, not planning. . . the flow of new funds [was] used to continue the projects first established, with basic organizational change resulting from extra-organizational pressure, not the free money" (p. 221). The squeaky wheel method of policy implementation occurred when policy mandates were not based on need, but were implemented according to the kind and amount of external influence that could be mobilized in behalf of the policy recipients.

A recent field study explored the process of implementing special education policy for poor rural students with severe disabilities (Capper, 1988). The conceptual framework of the investigation was drawn from the work on street level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1976; 1980; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). The study centered on the total context of the policy situation and extended the premise of street-level bureaucracy from the "street-level bureaucrat" to the intended recipient of policy. In this study, the extent to which P.L. 94-142 provisions were applied varied according to the kind and

amount of influence that could be mobilized in behalf of the child. Characteristics of the student and persons who supported his/her right to an education influenced the services for the student which in turn, affected the student's day. It was the squeaky wheel that received the grease of service delivery. The volume of the squeak determined the amount and kind of resource grease the student received.

The Squeaky Wheel at the Microlevel

Students with severe disabilities are a low incident population of students in rural schools. For the students in the study, it was clear that services were not based on their needs. Policy implementation was dependent on the strength of the students' external support. Or, in other words, resource grease was provided for these students if they were able to have support in making their squeak heard by local school administrators. External support which shaped the implementation of policy included child advocates, preschool services, and parents.

Child Advocates

Probably the strongest external influence on the degree of policy implementation in poor rural school

districts was the work of child advocates. A child advocate was an individual who supported the child and family to obtain special education services. One school administrator stated:

> . . . let's face it. . . in <this area> we provide services because we have to. . . we wouldn't do it without <the child advocates> on our backs. . .

Another administrator acknowledged the power of an advocate when he said, ". . . the only kids that receive speech and P.T. (physical therapy) are the kids with advocates. . . " One parent verbally threatened to obtain the services of an attorney if the district would not provide a full day of services. The special education coordinator reacted immediately by issuing a memorandum to the school principal stating the student was to receive services the entire school day.

Two students in the study, Tiffany and Roseann, did not have the support of an advocate. A third student, Elizabeth, and her family, used a private attorney to help her receive services.

Elizabeth's attorney affected her day in several ways. First, Elizabeth was allowed to attend the public school. Four months after Elizabeth was supposed to

begin public school, the attorney simply phoned the closest elementary school and informed the principal that Elizabeth would arrive at the school the following Monday, as provided under P.L.94-142 mandates. The district quickly began making preparations for Elizabeth to enroll at the school.

Second, for Elizabeth, the presence of the advocate drastically affected the policy process in terms of the required team meeting convened to make student educational decisions. The advocate support shaped the team composition, the number of team members present at meetings, the frequency of meetings, and the kind of records kept at the meetings.

Elizabeth's first meeting was held 12 days after the attorney contacted the school principal. Six members were present including the principal, the kindergarten teacher, the special education coordinator, the county instructional supervisor, the attorney and Elizabeth's mother. A second meeting was held a week later to determine Elizabeth's eligibility category. Eight people attending this meeting including a speech/language pathologist, a teacher of students labeled trainable mentally handicapped, the Head Start

teacher, a director of region special services, the instructional supervisor, the principal, the attorney, and Elizabeth's mother.

A third meeting was held 10 days later, following an interim evaluation period. Again, six people attended this meeting. Elizabeth's first Individualized Education Program (IEP) was written at this meeting, 6.5 months after her entitled start to school. Twelve pages of documentation were compiled, accompanied by seven pages of evaluation reports.

In contrast, at Elizabeth's review meeting one year later when the attorney was no longer in the community, one meeting was held and three people attended: Elizabeth's mother, the principal, and the special education teacher. Five pages of documentation were produced as a result of this meeting. No evaluation records were used. One year later, one meeting was held and three people attended. The next year, no meeting was held. For that year, only a special education teacher signed a three page IEP.

Two other students, Roseann and Tiffany, both did not have advocates. The implementation of policy in their education history differed from Elizabeth's. In

Roseann's two years of school, she did not have any record of any meetings that took place her first year, and she did not have an IEP that year. Her second year, she had one meeting attended by her mother, a regular education teacher, the special education teacher and the principal. For Tiffany's three years of schooling, her first IEP meeting took place in September and was attended by four persons including her mother, the teacher, the special education coordinator, and the principal. The second year, the meeting took place in October and the IEP was signed by her mother and the teacher. Tiffany did not have a team meeting or an IEP during her third year.

The role of a child advocate seemed to benefit only the child who was directly represented. It was the effect the advocate did not have on services that was most significant for the days of Elizabeth, Tiffany and Roseann.

For Elizabeth, the absence of the advocate's support meant she did not receive speech therapy, but other students with less severe speech problems in her classroom, who had advocate support, received speech services. In Tiffany's district, a student with very

similar learning needs, who attended another county school and had legal representation, received one-to-one training her entire school day with an appropriately certified teacher, and, in addition, this student received a complete summer program. For Roseann, it meant she did not receive speech because "no therapist is available" as was stated on her IEP. Roseann's mother said that ". . . they (the district) don't have a speech therapist. . . " Yet, in Roseann's classroom, two students with advocates received speech therapy. Interviews revealed the district employed three full-time therapists and contracted with five additional therapists for speech services.

One exception was found when the advocate indirectly influenced the days of more than just one student, and resulted in the addition of a high school classroom where none previously existed. A high school student had been placed in an elementary school and classroom for her entire school career. Her advocate insisted upon and succeeded in securing an age-appropriate placement at the high school. As a result, all high school-aged students in the district labeled as

trainable mentally handicapped attended the high school classroom.

Preschool Services

Child advocates increased, to a measurable degree, the amount of resource grease for student services. Preschool intervention, a second influence on policy implementation significantly affected the first level of special education policy mandates, the evaluation.

At age three, Elizabeth attended Head Start, a center-based preschool program which received funding for disadvantaged children as well as a percentage of support for children with disabilities. Elizabeth received her first evaluation at the age of 2 years, 10 months at an urban, university-based evaluation center which specialized in services for children with multiple special needs. Head Start continued this annual evaluation for Elizabeth and routinely sent evaluation results and notices to her local school district to prepare them for her school entry at the age of five years. The evaluation team included speech pathologists, physical and occupational therapists, pediatricians, child psychologists and social workers.

Roseann was excluded from the Head Start program in her community. However, she received home-based services from a private service agency. The agency arranged and funded a comprehensive evaluation for Roseann prior to her school entry. The evaluation took place at the same urban, university-based evaluation center where Elizabeth received her evaluations. The evaluation was conducted over a period of four days. She was seen by nine different specialists which resulted in a 44-page evaluation report complete with recommendations for activities to meet her needs. On the final evaluation day, a meeting was held and all the specialists shared the results with Roseann's mother.

In contrast, Tiffany had no preschool services. Her first and only evaluation occurred several weeks prior to school entry. It consisted of an observation of Tiffany and an interview with her mother at their home, by a psychometrist with no prior experience with students with multiple special needs.

The range of preschool services also did not seem to affect the evaluations conducted after school entry. P.L.94-142 required a comprehensive re-evaluation every three years. After two years in school, Roseann did not

receive any further formal evaluation to follow-up the preschool evaluation. After three years of school, Tiffany had not received a re-evaluation. Elizabeth received a second comprehensive evaluation in her third year of public school. Except for a teacher checklist completed in one year, no evaluations were conducted in the interim years.

Even though Elizabeth and Roseann both had comprehensive preschool evaluations, the coordination and translation of the evaluation information into goals and classroom activities to meet those goals did not take place. Therefore, in spite of their preschool evaluations, their days did not significantly differ from Tiffany's day. Thus, while the preschool squeak had the potential to exact district resource grease through its' evaluations and subsequent parent and district contacts, the squeak was significantly diminished upon public school entry.

Parents

Sometimes parents, a third source of external support, independently obtained services for their child from the district. However, parent support was a much

less significant influence on policy implementation when compared to child advocates and preschool services.

In Roseann's room, and indeed in her district, no money was allotted in the budget for materials. All parents in Roseann's classroom were each asked to donate twenty dollars to the classroom for materials. However, some parents did not comply with the district's request, because they knew P.L.94-142 was supposed to provide a "free" public education for their child. At the insistence of one parent, Roseann's teacher did receive money from the district to purchase a therapeutic ball.

Parents who successfully negotiated changes for their own child's program rarely resulted in the other children with special needs benefitting from the change. For example, one district required all students labeled trainable mentally handicapped to only attend school until 11:00 a.m., then the students were bussed home. When a parent complained about the situation and insisted her child attend school for a full day, as required by law, the district allowed that one child to stay all day and continued to send the other students home.

The Squeaky Wheel at the Systems Level

At the microlevel of individual children, special education policy was implemented according to the degree of external support for the child including child advocates, preschool services, and parents. Capper's (1988) study did not specifically consider the kind or degree of external support used or needed by rural disadvantaged school districts to receive resources from the state level to support local implementation. However, the administrators did agree that they did not receive the support necessary to carry out the policy.

One example of inadequate state support emerged from the mandate to identify students with disabilities. School districts in rural disadvantaged settings would not identify, or would underidentify students because they were unable to recruit and retain qualified teaching personnel in these settings. The statement was frequently heard, ". . . don't identify them, because then we will have to serve them." One administrator said he could easily fill 10% or 400 "slots" of special education. In turn, that could mean approximately 35-40 units of special education funding from the state. The funding allotted for each handicapped person from the

state education agency, was not a sufficient financial incentive for local districts to identify students with disabilities.

Another year, the district requested 24 units of state funding, but received only 21 units. The state expected the local district to pay for the other three units. However, the local district, struggling financially, did not pay for the other three units of salary, and approximately 30 students who would have received services, were not served. A second district administrator echoed similar sentiments about state support. Last year the district requested 28 units of special education funding, but received 1 unit. This administrator stated that an urban county 1/3 their size received 82 units. The administrator acknowledged:

> . . . we <the rural school districts> are just not getting our fair share. . . we were slow in getting special education started in these rural areas in the last 10, 15, 20 years. . . richer counties got a jump on us. . .

A Symbiotic Relationship

The acquisition of resources to implement policy placed the local administrator between state officials

and child advocates resulting in a symbiotic relationship between the systems/micro level. School district administrators argued that many times the grease requested for the squeaky wheel from a child advocate served to salve the conscience of the parent, rather than smooth the educational path for the student. One administrator felt parent requests were not always in the best interests of the child, and as a representative of the superintendent and school board, felt most requests by parents were "unreasonable demands." These demands, in turn, strained existing resources that, they felt, may have positively influenced the days of Elizabeth, Tiffany and Roseann. One administrator illustrated the cycle of conflict:

> . . . the State Department <of Education> puts in a budget for <a department to support advocates for students>. . . they <the advocates> intervene with the parent. . . <who> represents the parent and what the parent wants, not the child. This results in demands on the school system and the state department. . . demands that aren't met. . . that can't be filled. . . demands that the <state or district> don't intend to fill . . . What is

> the State Department <of Education> doing for the taxpayer? Is the tax payer willing to support the one emotionally disturbed child?. . . the one visually impaired child?. . . the one ED/BD (emotionally disturbed/behavior disordered> child.?. . So the parent demands due process procedures which is supposed to be a fair hearing between the parents and the district. But in a hearing, the District always loses. For example, in a past case concerning a hearing impaired child, the hearing officer ruled for the school board. That was 8 years ago. The parents have continued to demand <services> since then. . . The hearing cost us $12,000. Since the hearing, the child has cost us $10,000 - $12,000. . .

Thus, the implementation process at the microlevel between the intended beneficiary of policy and the policy implementor, is a reflection of the larger, systemic implementation process between the state education department, and the poor local school district. Poor students and school districts with higher proportions of disadvantaged students are both recipients of the squeaky wheel method of policy

implementation. The relationship between the systems level and microlevel can be described as symbiotic, which places both poor students and poor school districts at risk for educational failure (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Barriers to Implementation

Previous literature and research can frame the reasons why both poor rural students with severe disabilities, and disadvantaged school districts have such low levels of influence in regards to resources to support policy implementation. Sher (1988) reports on the lack of support provided for rural school districts from state and federal authorities, and explains why rural schools do not get their fair share of funding. In addition, in a study of special education implementation by Weatherley and Lipsky (1977), implementation discrepancies between affluent and poor students were noted (Weatherley, 1979). Weatherley found that disparities among school districts in meeting the needs of students with disabilities were directly

related to the wealth of the states and school districts.

These systems level implementation barriers described by Sher (1988) and Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) parallel the microlevel implementation barriers between the poor students with disabilities (and their families) and the school district (Helge, 1984; Capper, 1988), as seen in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Poor students with severe disabilities and less affluent school districts are both the recipients of the squeaky wheel method of policy implementation, and both encounter similar barriers to obtain resources and services. If the squeaky wheel method of policy implementation is a given entity for less affluent school districts and poor children with disabilities, then, what actions can be taken, both systemically and individually to increase state and district support?

Increasing the Volume Of the Squeak

Sher (1988) recommends three systemic strategies and Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) suggest three systemic and

one microlevel strategy to reduce inequitable resource allocations. And, because the systemic/microlevel relationship is symbiotic, then successful implementation strategies for one level, should also be considered for the other level.

Sher (1988) recommends vision, voice, and victories to increase the sound of the rural school district squeak. Sher contends that

> . . . more than anything else, rural education lacks vision--of its own worth, its own contributions, its own goals--a vision of its own potential to foster educational excellence and finally, a vision of its role as a partner in rural community development (p. 36).

To show its relevance for individual students at the microlevel, Sher's first assertion may be paraphrased as follows:

> . . . more than anything else, services for rural students with severe disabilities lack vision---of their own worth, the students' own contributions, their own goals--a vision of their own potential . . . as contributors to rural community development

Sher also suggests that the rural education constituency numbers in the millions, but they are not organized to articulate a common vision. At the microlevel, rural students with severe disabilities also have the potential to be a part of an organized voice. Although these students constitute a low incidence disability category in both rural and urban areas, by collaborating with the other low incidence disabilities (i.e., sensory impairments), and the persons who provide services for them from the variety of agencies and disciplines, these students too, could have a strong, unified voice to influence resource allocations.

Finally, Sher (1988) suggests rural school administrators need victories by sharing their vision and success stories. Sher claims that ". . . victories become self-perpetuating. . . " Likewise, some strategies developed for rural students with disabilities in response to limited resources or geographic barriers, such as mainstreaming into general education classrooms, have become the state-of-the-art for the rest of the nation. Rural personnel need to share these successful strategies with their rural and urban colleagues.

Weatherley and Lipsky (1979) suggest that to meet the requirements of the special education law in Massachusetts, implementors should emphasize (a) personnel preparation, (b) state level support rather than compliance monitoring, (c) persons routinely assigned to represent and support parents at the local level, and (d) rewards for successful implementation. Results from this study also suggest that less affluent school districts could benefit from the work of an advocate for its organizational needs. The advocate could provide a stronger voice at the state level to prevent disadvantaged districts from continuing to receive the leftovers of state resources.

In the political arena of education, the squeaky wheel method of policy implementation may be a perpetual reality at both the microlevel and systems level of implementation. Policy makers and administrators should consider the symbiotic/reflective characteristics of implementation with disadvantaged populations at both organizational levels when discerning educational barriers and when developing strategies to surmount the obstacles. Only then can the risk of education failure for disadvantaged populations be lessened.

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Table 1

Barriers to Implementation and the Systemic/Microlevel Interface

Disadvantaged School Districts and Their Relationship to State Support	Poor students with Disabilities and Their Families and Their Relationship to the School District
1. Placism	1. Handicapism
2. Rural education is not a priority	2. Special education is not a priority
3. Rural realities (poverty)	3. Family realities (poverty)
4. Inequality and unfairness in per capita resource distributions. State equalization formulas fail to eliminate the wealthy/poor disparity	4. Local support does not consider different levels of need for students and families
5. Overburdened and understaffed administration to obtain outside funding	5. Overburdened and understaffed teachers/staff
6. The price is too high, internal "strings" are attached to district requests for help	6. The price is too high, parents seeking support are often labeled "trouble-makers" by the local community
7. Fair share is not demanded	7. Parents don't demand their fair share
8. Lack of good ideas	8. Lack of positive examples
9. An absence of effective organizing	9. An absence of effective parent organizing
10. Avoiding allies	10. Not using allies
11. Lack of business and industry for partnerships	11. Lack of alternative services

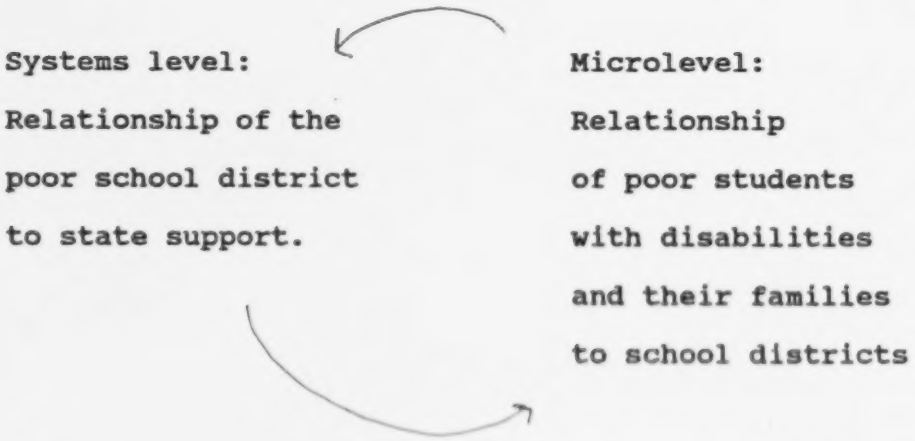
Systems level:
Relationship of the
poor school district
to state support.
Microlevel:
Relationship
of poor students
with disabilities
and their families
to school districts

Figure Captions

Figure 1. The symbiotic relationship model.